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Washington, D.C. -- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has published a new regulation extending through the year 2001 the period in which undiagnosed illnesses in Gulf War veterans may appear and be eligible for disability compensation.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jesse Brown said, "Some Gulf War veterans' claims had been denied because their disabilities due to undiagnosed symptoms did not appear until after a two-year presumptive period. This rule broadens VA's ability to give disabled Gulf War veterans the benefit of the doubt for a more realistic period of time as scientific research moves closer to answers about the causes of their health problems."

The regulation, published as an interim rule in the April 29 Federal Register with a request for public comments, is effective immediately. VA may amend the rule based on input received during the public comment period, which ends June 30.

Of 85,402 Gulf War veteran compensation claims completed by VA, 66,277 have been service-connected and 28,285 veterans are receiving disability compensation, 803 for undiagnosed illnesses.

Under the extended time frame, VA anticipates granting compensation to a significantly higher number of veterans disabled due to undiagnosed illnesses that meet the new manifestation period.

"I have instructed the Veterans Benefits Administration to re-review all compensation claims of Gulf War veterans that were previously denied because of the two-year presumptive period and to notify these veterans of the results of the reconsideration," Brown said. "As our review progresses, we will seek to keep veterans informed through our newsletter, which is sent to more than a quarter-million Gulf War veterans who either have filed disability claims, utilized the VA medical-care system, or participated in VA's Persian Gulf Registry Program or the Department of Defense's Comprehensive Clinical Evaluation Program."

Brown urged veterans who believe they may now qualify for compensation but who have not previously submitted a claim and veterans wishing to reopen a previous claim to call VA at 1-800-827-1000 for information.

General health information unrelated to the compensation process is available to concerned Gulf War veterans at 1-800-749-8387. A special protocol medical examination is available to Gulf War veterans through their local VA medical center, and a Gulf War veteran whose health has changed since an initial examination is encouraged to receive a followup examination under the Persian Gulf Registry program.

Servicemembers who remain on active duty today but who previously served in the Gulf War theater may obtain the protocol health examination through military treatment facilities. Information is available at 1-800-796-9699.